

WHAT'S IN A TRANSLATION?

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It has often been argued that, with the multiplicity of fine English translations available, the Bible student need not master the original languages. This is especially argued of pastors today. With all the work of counseling and calling, and of administering a burgeoning program, it is said, skill in the Biblical languages is a luxury too costly to maintain. All of this depends to a great extent upon one's conception of the role of the pastor. If his primary role is to be an expounder of the eternal Word of Truth, certainly no skill which makes that Word more lucid and understandable can be termed a luxury.

Those in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions are often reminded that they have clear precedent for this latter position, but it is no less true for the followers of Wesley and Asbury. Both of these founding fathers of Methodism stressed the importance of the original languages to their young preachers. It is especially interesting that Asbury should do so, seeing that he himself had only six years of formal education and was shackled with the rigors of wilderness travel and constant administrative tasks. Yet his journal notes that while America's rough roads would not let him read on horseback as Wesley did, it still gave him opportunity to work on his Hebrew.¹

But perhaps the situation is changed now with the number of new English translations which have come into existence since the days

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1. *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, ed. by Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958. Vol. I, 750.

of the Reformers and the Evangelical Awakening. Certainly God's providence has made it possible for the most untrained layman to perceive and even preach the truths of Scripture. But what of the depths and nuances which will feed and ground and lead on to maturity? Can he who is charged with expounding the Truth afford to depend on translations alone? He cannot. Whenever there is an ambiguity, a possibility of several meanings in the original, a translator must often make a choice, choosing one meaning or the other for his translation. At this point of choice, a number of factors come into play, not the least of which is the theological inclination of the translators. The result is a colored translation which is more limited than is the original. He who would teach the Bible ought to be able to go behind this limitation.

An example of this problem of translations may be found in II Samuel 6:2 and its parallel, I Chronicles 13:6, where the ark and God's relationship to it are being discussed. The underlying questions are: what was the significance of the ark in Hebrew worship and what does this say of the Hebrew concept of God? For some years it has been customary among Old Testament scholars to think of the ark as a portable throne upon which were two sphinxes (winged lions with human heads) upon whose backs, in turn, sat the invisible deity. This reconstruction is based on examples of such thrones from the Ancient Near East (see I Kings 10:18–20 for a description of Solomon's throne, made along somewhat similar lines) and upon the fact that no certain descriptions of cherubim are given in Scripture.

The description of the ark given in Exodus 25:10–22 seems to be substantially different from that just mentioned. Here the stress is upon its nature as a box or container (which is the literal meaning of "ark"). Its primary significance was as a depository for the covenant and thus as a witness to the gracious initiative of God within history for man's redemption. It was because of its importance as a witness to His nature that God chose to speak from *between* the cherubim, not because it was His earthly throne. In contrast, the scholarly reconstruction denies the primacy of the covenant theme and makes the divine kingship of Yahweh and His invisibility the primary aspects of early Hebrew worship.

To the ordinary believer, it is hard to understand how scholars can ignore what seems to be the clear teaching of the Exodus passage and maintain that the ark was originally nothing more than a throne for the invisible deity. This is made possible by the JEDP theory of

the origins of the Pentateuch. According to this theory, among other things, the details of Hebrew worship were not finalized until very late, around the time of Ezra. The Exodus description, then, is a late reinterpretation of whatever the Ark's original nature may have been. Scholars who hold this position look to Judges, Samuel and Kings for pictures of early Israel's actual worship.

For this reason, the passage in II Samuel (and I Chronicles) is of special interest. Does it support the Exodus description or the scholarly reconstruction? The passage reports that David has set out "to bring up from there (Kiriath-Jearim) the ark of God" which is described as follows:

II Samuel 6:2

"— whose name is called by the name of the Lord of hosts that dwelleth *between* the cherubim." (KJV)

"— which is called by the name of the Lord of hosts *who sits enthroned on the cherbuim.*" (RSV)

"— which bears the name of the Lord of hosts, *who is enthroned upon the cherubim.*" (NEB)

"— which is called by the name of the Lord of hosts *who is seated upon the cherubim.*" (*An American Trans.*)

I Chronicles 13:6

"— the Lord, that dwelleth *between* the cherubims [sic] whose name is called upon it." (KJV)

"— which is called by the name of the Lord *who sits enthroned above the cherubim.*" (RSV)

"— the Lord *enthroned upon the cherubim*, the ark which bore his name^a."

"— the Lord *who is seated on the cherubim*, that is called by the Name." (*An American Trans.*)

A rigidly literal translation of the Hebrew of the two passages would read as follows:

I Samuel 6:2

"— which is called upon it the name of the name of Yahweh of

a. "which bore his name, probable reading; Heb. obscure." (NEB)

hosts the *sitter* [dweller?] of the cherubim.”

I Chronicles 13:6

“— Yahweh *the sitter* [dweller?] of the cherubim who [which?] is called Name [a name?].”²

The major question in both passages concerns the treatment of *yôšēb hakkerûbîm*, “the sitter of the cherubim.” The three modern translations all supply a preposition which is not in the Hebrew, “on” or “upon.” The Authorized Version, apparently on the basis of Exodus 25:22 where God is said to speak from “between the cherubim,” supplies “between.” In addition, the modern translations opt for aspects of the primary meaning of *yšb*, “to set,” rather than for the derived meaning “to dwell” as does the Authorized. The two most popular translations, RSV and NEB, go a step farther, translating “enthroned on the cherbuim.”

Clearly, on the basis of these translations one would be warranted in arguing for the “throne” conception of the ark. But is the translation “enthroned on the cherubim” justifiable? A check of the usage of the verb *yšb* as “sit” reveals that whenever the thing sat upon is specified the appropriate preposition appears in the text. Thus, “he sat upon the throne” would appear as *yāšab ʿal hakkissēʾ*. The absence of the preposition in the present references may be only coincidence, but one is led to wonder if there was not some specific reason for it.

Beyond this, why should “sit” be drawn out to “enthroned?” It is argued from several references in the Psalms that “to sit” in certain contexts implies acting as king, or royal judge. Thus 2:4, “the sitter in the heavens will laugh;” 9:8, “The Lord will sit forever, his seat (throne) is established for judgment;” 29:10, “The Lord sits on the flood, the

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2. Obviously, the Chronicles passage offers some serious difficulties of interpretation, as indicated by the variety in the translations. The Hebrew relative particle is ambiguous in that unless the context is clear, which it is not here, it is impossible to be certain whether it refers to a thing (here, the ark) or a person (here, God). The *American Translation* preserves this uncertainty with the equally ambiguous English word “that.” Also, this translation is the least periphrastic in its handling of the remainder of the clause, relying on the fact that in late Judaism a euphemism for Yahweh was “The Name.”

Lord sits, King forever;" 55:20, "He who sits [from] of old;" 102:13 (Lam. 5:19), "And you, O Lord, will sit forever." However, to grant the cogency of the argument in these occurrences implies nothing with respect to the Samuel/Chronicles passages, for the two situations are quite unlike. Psalms is poetic with an accompanying heavy use of metaphor. The context with its references to eternality, majesty and power lends credence to the argument. On the other hand, Samuel and Chronicles are prose accounts purporting to be factual. There is nothing in the context which implies enthronement if one discounts prior scholarly assumption.

Where does this leave us? If nowhere else in Scripture does "sitting upon" something leave out the preposition, and since "enthroned" is neither demanded nor likely in this context, what is being said? It seems highly likely to this writer that the preposition was consciously left out to avoid the very possibility of the throne idea. Moreover, since "dwell" (habitually sitting in a certain place) is an aspect of this verb, perhaps something like the following is intended: "the One who is customarily present with respect to the cherubim." This is the place where God makes Himself known because of its witness to his covenant-nature. It is not his earthly residence (KJV) nor his earthly throne. While these findings make the Authorized Version the least offensive at this place (it admits the insertion of the preposition and inserts one in harmony with other scripture), they do not constitute a *carte blanche* support of that version. In numerous instances, it too needs to be corrected by the original, especially where new understandings of Greek and Hebrew constructions are available.

What's in a translation? Generally an adequate handling of the vast majority of Biblical material. But when the chips are down, when the faith is at stake, when enduring edification is desired, there is nothing like the original.